

IN BUSINESS

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When the Client is Wrong Telling the truth with a gentle touch is best for all.

“The customer is always right” is a mantra we hear all the time; so often, in fact, that it’s become canonized as one of the first rules of business. Alas, like most sweeping generalizations, it is also blindly misapplied. For while it might make plenty of sense in retail, when it comes to consulting or event planning it can ruin your business. Here’s how and why.

In retail, stores are selling stuff, things, products. Retailing is simply about delivering those products to consumers through a pleasing, cost-effective experience. If a consumer is unhappy with the experience they get at a retail store, the assumption is that they can always go somewhere else to buy the same product, so there’s almost no reason not to make the customer happy, even at the retailer’s short term detriment. Keeping the customer as a continued shopper, in the long run, is the ultimate goal.

Service businesses, on the other hand, provide much more customized interactions. The client comes to us for our specific, individual expertise. We take time to learn about them, their events, their goals, styles and desires, and then design and recommend solutions specifically tailored to their needs. If the client wants to do something that is not going to work, it is not only in our best interest to push back, it’s in the client’s interest too.

If you’re meeting with your accountant to discuss your taxes, and you want to write off your massage treatments as a business expense (because, hey, you come up with your best ideas on the massage table), would you want him to say, “Whatever you want, you’re the customer?” No way. You

want him to look you hard in the eye and say, “Nice try. Unless your client is the masseuse, that’s not going to work.”

Sometimes pushing back with a demanding client can be difficult and awkward. But that’s what they need, and that’s what will make you invaluable to them. In a recent *New York Times* article, “Valuing Those Who Tell You the Bitter Truth,” Pamela Fields, the CEO of Stetson, talks about the importance of hearing divergent opinions from people who feel comfortable disagreeing with her.



The phrase “Speak Truth to Power” is typically applied to politics, where too often our leaders surround themselves with sycophants who are more interested in kissing up than in telling the truth. But the mantra applies everywhere. In sports we often see star athletes get ruined because there is no one in their entourage who speaks up about what’s in the athlete’s best interest if it means disagreeing with him.

And it certainly applies to working with our event clients, whether we are independents, agencies talking to paying clients, or in-house planners talking to our internal business unit clients. Soften the blow as needed, but you have to deliver the news.

If the client’s really set on a lousy idea, try saying, “That’s a great idea. Unfortunately I just don’t think it’s appropriate for this event because (insert your reason here). Believe me, I’d love to say we can do it, but it’s my professional responsibility to advise you why I don’t think it’s going to work. The last thing I want is for you to come to me afterwards and say, ‘You’re the professional; why didn’t you warn me about this?’”

It’ll be difficult, no question. But they will respect you more as an expert, and you will become indispensable to them. And that, ultimately, is what you want. **es**